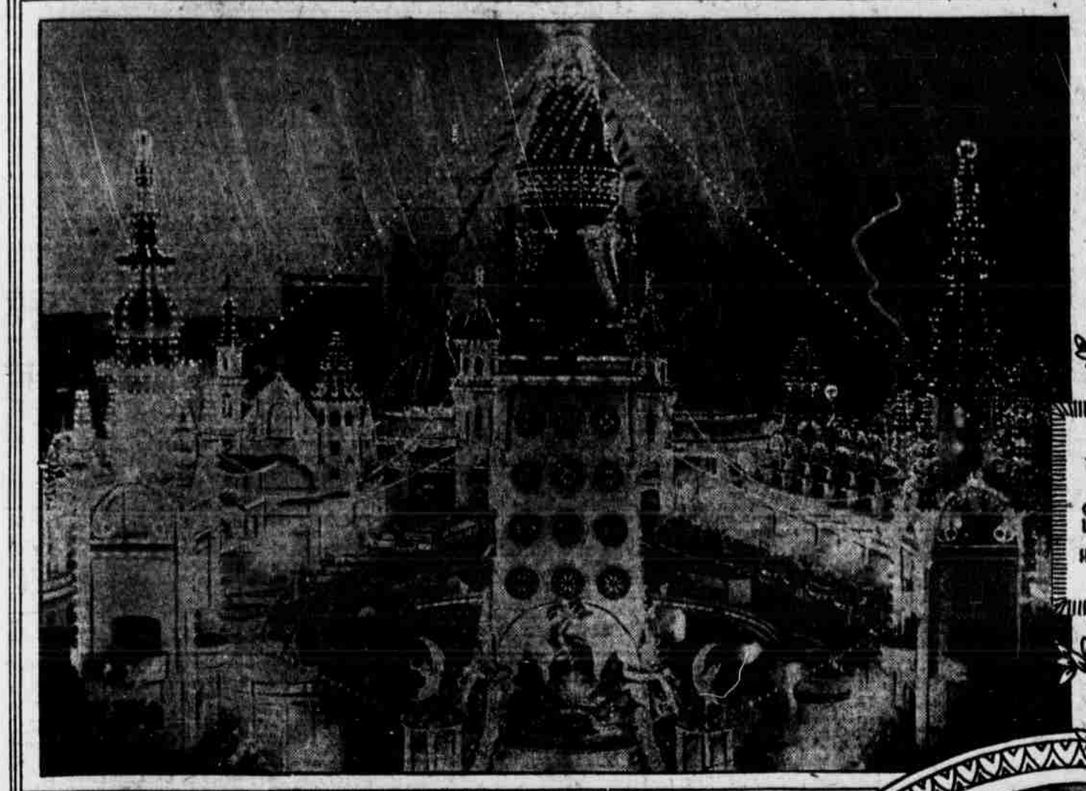
Fred Thompson's Colorful Life and His Triumphs in Showland



FRED THOMPSON and HIS MASTER CREATIONS, LUNA PARK and The HIPPODROME

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Recent Death Recalls Picturesque Career of Man Who Made the "Trip to the Moon," Created Luna Park and Built the Hippodrome

By J. I. C. CLARKE.

There was no moon, but a coverlet of stars overhung the stillness of the June night. Scarcely a sound arose from the massed thousands, looking spectral in the violet light of the electrons. Down the enormous aisle formed by the double line of gigantic pylons stretching back to the chancel-like majesty of the crystal Luditorium came, on the stroke of nine, the throb of the muffled drums. The dark-red flames on the summits of the pylons flickered on the steel and silver of the slowly moving files of the Pictorial Guard, advancing with reversed arms. All hearts were heavy, but all was done that the arts he loved could do to denote the honor in which they held him, the grief with which they saw him go upon his unreturning journey.

Models of his triumphs, made in his new alabaster, mounted on scarlet-draped platforms and borne on willing shoulders, followed the Pictorial Guard, and when the head of the long processional line had reached the forty-sixth pylon the March composed for the leavetaking broke forth in a low, melodious wail as of trumpets and horns from the wireless resounders above. Murmurs arose in whispers from the dim onlooking multitude as his creations were recognized in the white models. Perhaps the model of the moon received most praise, but all were recognized. Again all voices were silent as the great catafalque came into view, however distant it might be from any one beholder, for the four heroic male figures at the corners of the canopy—Form, Strength, Color, Sound—stood out in attitudes of conquest above the curling smoke from a hundred silver censers. These were swung by beautiful coryphees who marched in hollow square about the car to the rhythm of the censer chains. It was nearing midnight when . . .

NOT at all like that was the modest funeral procession of Frederick William Thompson, which passed down the noble nave of St. Bartholomew's on Sunday last with the Rev. Dr. Percy Gordon leading and in his vestments lending it the sole touch of color and ritual. In all there were present perhaps 100. They were of the dead man's friends outside his family, and included the unrelated curious who attend such gatherings where the socially conspicuous may sometimes be seen. At the door of the great church on Park avenue in the Sabbath stillness of the large apartment houses facing it they melted easily away in twos and threes leaving a slender remainder to continue in the little string of limousines following the hearse to Woodlawn.

A quiet, private funeral it was, and beside that of "just a church member" on Lexington avenue, a few blocks away, with its carloads of flowers and its packed congregation of real mourners, the St. Bartholomew gathering seemed what an undertaker would call "exclusive," so unhonored was it of the presence of the stirring populous mimic world in which Fred Thompson had counted for so much. We will not blame them. Was not the Hippodrome closed until the fall? Was not Coney Island open wide for these last Sundays of a thirsty June? Were not the Lambs getting ready for their gambol that same evening? And were not all the rest off motoring to the suburbs in search of the cool and savor of the sea or the blossoms along country roads?

Still it is hard to think of the funeral of the great show constructor of our time without pomp and color and numbers and in any other setting than the grandiose. Some such setting with thunder of Rachmaninoff's well known prelude in our ears would better suit the popular conception of such a man's departure from the scenes of his life activities. Death, one sadly sees, continues to be rich in surprises.

A Picturesque Life.

It was indeed a picturesque life and one wholly of our day, that went out so untimely as Fred Thompson's did in a hospital at the end of a two years' struggle with disease in his forty-sixth year—the age at which men really begin to ripen for their great triumphs. He had triumphed in large creations in his early '30s; he had failed in great show enterprises later, but always the undertaking was largely and finely and cleanly imagined, and who is to say that the failure was his? What are dollars and cents to a man who offers his fellow citizens a trip to the moon? If they accept his invitation he grows rich; if they stop going before he stops the show it is another story, and meanwhile he is thinking up something better and bigger still.

Lean, wiry, energetic, the young man was a true American type. Unlike most men attracted to the "show" business, he brought the education of an architect, a trending to artistry to the aid of a large imagination, an undaunted heart and a winning personality. It was not in his outfit to have a clear business head, as we measure them. Fortune found a partner for him who had. In Omaha he came up against a rival who, it is said, took possession of one of his dreams and carried it to Buffalo. So enterprising a person, so full of business acumen did Thompson find Elmer Dundy, that he elected him a partner, and together they made a great team until twelve years ago, when Death came in with one of those surprises of his and dissolved the partnership by carrying off Dundy. It was, indeed, this loss—this death of Skip, as they called him—that made the ways of "big things" so perilous thereafter for the active brain of Thompson.

But the man who made the "Trip to the Moon" at Buffalo in 1900 and transplanted it to Coney Island; who built and started Luna Park at Coney Island as a complete coordinated show centre of ready made beauty and varied amusement for the millions; who built and organized the Hippodrome and its colossal style of entertainment, which has been changed but in detail, not in character, since he left it, and is still the type of the hugely popular; such a man, though all his ready money slipped from his hands, was not the one to lose heart or confidence in himself. His plunge into the theatrical world was at a time when money was flowing in upon him and gains did no more than encourage him to go on while losses were merely unpleasant incidents not to be worried over. But those grim fellows, the keepers of accounts, pursue the builders on shoestrings and reduce the apparent to the real, and thus it came about that totals looking like millions shrunk to mites and vulgar bankruptcy tripped the heels of the daring who had sailed the sky.

Toyland Grown Up.

Few, indeed, of these great engineers of amusement amass real riches or keep them when amassed. Charles Frohman's estate was small out of all proportion to his eminence held so many fighting years, clinging to what he prized beyond all money, the headship of the producing theatrical managers. Remember that he locked horns for headship in London and high standing in Paris, as well as battling always for his lead in New York.

P. T. Barnum, the great exception among showmen, did hold to his rising riches, but Buffalo Bill could not for the life of him, nor could Steele Mackaye, a great manager of his day, which closed just before the dawn of Thompson. Mackaye's fortunes rose and fell with painful regularity through the '70s and '80s, though his dramatic triumphs seemed an all but unbroken string. Like Thompson, the keepers of accounts were his enemies to the last.

Thompson's great invention at San Francisco, "Toyland Grown Up," did as much for him. It was the fine flower of his thoughts for nearly three years. Toys made full size of men and women, toys doing all things that humans do, all sorts of show developments treated from the toy standpoint were to astonish the world. He had one tin soldier 150 feet high. But the gods of success had not smiled on the exposition as a whole. Brilliant, beautiful, finely related, exquisitely situated, it had not the teeming population to draw upon to make its success more than nominal. The long series of collapses of fortune that preceded his journey to the far West had not chilled his enthusiasm nor dimmed his imagination, but he had long been sustaining his nerves in courses that tended in the end to shatter them. The poor showing made could not damp his spirits, yet it spelled defeat, if not absolute disaster. Now disaster registers on the physical even if it be carried on the mental or spiritual. No doubt it registered on Thompson as surely as it upset both the spirit and the body of Steele Mackaye. Inside the index rubber of the toughest and most resilient of us there is a heart and a system of subconscious nerves to be hurt by disaster, to be shaken into disease and shocked at last to death.

From these dismal endings one fain turns back to the glorious days of the rollicking partners who came to New York with their shoestrings tied to "The Trip to the Moon" after the close of the Buffalo Exposition.

They had made money, but it was only a fraction of that needed to break into Coney Island. Fred had two great things—personality and brains. He had it enthusiasm, his eager optimism, his clear terse explanations, his skill in draughtsmanship conquered. Credit was his for the asking. He was the spender; Skip Dundy was the controller. Their "Trip to the Moon" repeated and outshone their Buffalo success and saw them well on their road to the building of Luna Park, perhaps Thompson's greatest conception. Here his fancy, his imagination had full play. He practically designed it all.

One theory of his was that good humor abhorred straight lines. "The straight line means the grim; it is the frame of the ghastly." So every pillar had some disturbing, cheering curve, every summit was rounded or softened with spirals. Taking a blue print—and blue prints were his minor gods—he would demonstrate how innocent of straight lines it all was. At a cost of millions Luna Park arose and its success was instantaneous. Money flowed in tidal waves. Fred Thompson rode the highest wave, and the partners, still using their magic shoestring, began the Hippodrome. Its erection, its starting, its huge unexampled productions, throwing all that the Kiralfys had done into the shade, are the topnotes of optimism in showland's spectacular enterprise. Stories innumerable are told of the lavishness of Thompson that always seemed to justify itself alongside the attempted conservatism of the gently restrained hand of Dundy.

"I must have $475,000," said Thompson.

"We have just $230," replied Dundy. "Couldn't you get along with $10,000?"

"I shall buy $10 trousers," said Thompson.

"Your figure is $7.50," said Dundy.

Thus they played at great and small while leaping from enterprise to enterprise, having fun out of it all and seeing the public rise ever to their bait.

How much real residual wealth the partners owned at any time, even in the hours of their highest success, it is impossible to say. Probably not a tithe of the estimates of $1,500,000 to $3,000,000 that they claimed. But so much money was in sight, so much money could be had for the asking, that there seemed no end to it. The money that was had for the asking always had a string to it that they never affected to see. A new fancy came to Thompson. Down at Luna Park he had a spectacle he called "Wireless." A pirate ship came in; there was slaughter by the pirates and a rescue brought by wireless. He would have a play made on such a theme, and he did. More, he would become a producer, a manager, and he did. He was branching out. Now was his top time of endeavor, all carried blithely, cheerfully, with sparkling blue eyes opening wide or closing with concentration. It was so that "Polly of the Circus" entered his life with charming little Mabel Taliaferro as the heroine. What? The conqueror was conquered. It was not a long courtship, and so they were married. Play followed play, some successful, like "Brewster's Millions," which they say he almost forced Winchell Smith to write, and some not at all so.

"I like this theatrical life," he would say. "It gives one a chance to battle with something new every two months."

With his bride he indulged in the outwards of high fortunes. Just as Lester Wallack, the actor and manager, had bought the yacht Columbia when she had won the second race for the America's Cup in the '70s, so Fred Thompson bought Sir Thomas Lipton's Shamrock after she had lost to the American boat, turning her from sloop to schooner. He had, beside the 135 foot steam yacht Elsa for luxurious cruising, all these Aladdin wonders, in contrast with the half-starved student Thompson had been in New York, living in a hall bedroom and eating anywhere food was procurable a short fifteen years earlier. The newly wedded pair travelled in princely style over France, Italy and southern Europe in their own automobile. They were important in Paris, solid in London, and noted everywhere. But 1907—year of disaster—was coming up the sky. John G. Gates, who had stood by Thompson, told him to sell out of everything he could that stood at risk. Alas! all Thompson had stood so. Pressure arose from all quarters, the strings to the money advanced began to pull. The Hippodrome passed to the Shuberts. Then in 1907 Dundy died quite suddenly of pneumonia. Shortening of sail was perforce, but the stiff upper lip of Thompson exhibited no giving way.

Light and Shadow.

Luna Park, the great winner, was becoming a burden. Why? Wasn't it always popular? Yes, but it was shading and costing horribly all the time. You see, every resort in the United States was having its Luna Park, imitating, however badly, the great original, compelling Thompson to emphasize Coney Island more than ever. The old shows had to be torn out every year and new ones installed. Thompson liked this job as a job, but withered under the stress of paying for it.

"I must have light and shadow in alternate streaks," he would say. "If people are to weep here they must laugh next door. It is best of all if they can laugh and cry together as they do at a melodrama or a good comedy."

A Brooklyn bank had advanced $250,000 and the note had been renewed a couple of times. It cried out for the money.

"Dear me," said Thompson; "I must quit this construction for an hour and settle this bank thing." He motored to the bank, caught the board in session and was asked to wait by a clerk.

"I cannot wait," he said. "We are losing money every minute I am away from the new feature we are building," and with his bluest smile he cheerfully bustled his way in.

Shocked dignity, apologies as before, a short speech, a bold prophecy, and within the hour he was back in Coney Island, the note renewed, and another $100,000 tacked to it.

Of course the trail was downward and such heroic treatment of bankers could not be often repeated. The panic of 1907 had struck him hard. Theatrical losses were heavy, other losses mounted up, and the day of bankruptcy came with some $7,000 assets against $664,000 on the debit side. Then too there was a divorce by a little wife worn out with worry and the effect on conduct of remedies that were not remedial for losses falling from all quarters.

Still the unfailing cheer, the undaunted heart in Fred. Things brightened awhile; there was a new wife, Miss Selome Wheat Pilcher, estimable, trusting and able.

In his best moments he was simple, boyhearted, reaching for the best and enjoying it all. One notable trait was that while he sought the elegant and costly he detested the appearance of newness. He would never be satisfied till a new automobile had its primal polish dulled down. He would delight in seeing new high priced furniture scratched up. He disliked new gloves. He never had more than three suits of clothes. He was always buying new suits and giving the old ones away. Giving, in fact, was his pleasure. On Christmas Eve, New Year's, Thanksgiving he would go to the bread lines and cheapest lodging houses provided with great bags of silver for distribution. That was clearly not the way to pay interest on loans gayly borrowed, but it gave relief to the almoner, who told life stories for days that he had heard on his trips to the Bowery and Cherry Hill.

"And people I meet complain of life," he would say to his friends as tailpiece to these hard luck stories. "There's always something more than what happens to you. Cheer up!"

The Long Fight.

All sorts of internal disorders attacked him—the long arm of gout, the liver, the kidneys, the stomach—poor chap; he was paying.

His mother, whom he really adored and whom he brought with him on most of his fine outings, died. Another hold on life was gone, but he did not despair. After Toyland proved to be no joyland they made a benefit for him at Coney Island. It yielded a meagre but welcome $2,000. If the millions his shows had made happy had sent him a cent apiece it would have been that a score of times over.

But how many of the millions that he served knew Fred Thompson by sight or even by picture? He was no hider of his light under a bushel, but it simply was not his way or his thought to be part of what he exhibited. In his palmiest days at Luna Park it was his wont to go about alone observing, a cap pulled down over his eyes. Obvious strangers often asked him if Fred Thompson was about or where could they see him.

"I just saw him go around that corner," was his invariable reply, pointing in the direction of one of the "concessions." "Go quick and you'll hear him talking." It was one of his jokes on the "barkers" of Luna.

Barnum Part of Show.

We know that P. T. Barnum, the great pioneer showman, was always part of his own show. Who that remembers his last live days can forget the barouche with the inevitably shrewd but bland faced old man in it driving around the circus ring and bowing right and left? Who that has an eye for the picturesque can forget in the thirty years of the Wild West shows the figure of the splendid horseman with his wide felt sombrero, his mustachios and his goatee as he rode around firing his rifle or grandly saluting, hat in hand! Well one recalls the gradual grizzling and whitening at last of that goatee.

Fred Thompson had deftly indeed prepared for an inconspicuous parting from the multitude that he had so amused and tickled. There was a nicety in this that spoke volumes. To be lovable in all striving, playing, bathing, winning, losing, suffering, dying was clearly his gift, and it was a great one and an enviable. Before his coffin a Sunday ago four friends walked as pallbearers. Behind the coffin his widow, in black and veiled, walked, broken and in tears. Blood relatives followed—just a few—and then in a slender, delicate form, in simple black, one recognized his first wife, Mabel, tears on her face and grief shaking her bent shoulders—a touching picture.

The memory of him could inspire enough devotion to bring that about. Small wonder that the old employees of Luna Park who knew him as the master there had beggared themselves for a day to send an enormous heart shaped floral piece in red carnations, and across it in white his own old time motto: "The Heart of Coney Island." It helped something to make up for the absence of many a man whom he had made when there was real red blood beating in that kind heart.

Giving Farmsteads Individual Names

THE practice is growing of giving farmsteads individual names which will add distinction to the farm itself and define it as a home and as a business organization instead of an unnamed piece of land that does not deserve a description.

With the growing need of advertising farm products and of identifying farms in connection with community enterprises the New York State College of Agriculture at Ithaca suggests that farms should have distinctive names. It points out that the identities of persons and even of farm animals are recognized by names and that farmsteads, inclusive of the whole, are equally deserving.

Possibly the commonest type of name is one which is derived from some topographic feature of the farm, such as Riverdale, Brookdale, Lakeside, Hillcrest, Shady Valley and the like; and many farms take their names from trees. Names of this character are Woodlawn, Shady Lane, Maple Grove, Pinecroft, Birch Farm, and so on.

A favorite form of name is made by combining the old English words hurst or croft, which mean homestead, with the name of the owner. This practice gives rise to such names as Bensonhurst and Allanscroft. Sometimes the name of the owner is suggested in a fanciful way, as in the case of a farm once owned by former Dean Bailey of Cornell, the farm being known as Bailiwick. In another instance Stone Farm denoted the name of the owner and the character of the land. In still another instance a man who had looked forward all his life to acquiring a farm in his own right finally celebrated his ownership by naming his place Iona Farm.

The college points out that a name should not be too fanciful but should be dignified and descriptive. In a majority of cases, it says, the simpler and more commonplace the words that are used the better the result may be